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NEW BOOKS REVIEWED

THE CHRONICLES OF AMERICA. Edited by Allen Johnson, Ph.D., Chairman of the Department of History of Yale University. New Haven: Yale University Press.

It is perhaps an open question whether the *study* of text-books—study as distinct from reading—does not, in many cases and especially in certain subjects, do the student more harm than good. Unless measures are taken to secure understanding of the specific problems of a subject, rather than of the book, no real grasp or mastery is acquired. But this is not the worst result that may follow from a mistaken method. The most disastrous consequence is likely to be that the student becomes unfitted to learn by reading, unable to absorb.

This consideration, if important at all, is important as affecting not so much the schools and colleges as the general reader—of all ages. Our colleges, not to speak of our secondary schools, have long realized the deficiencies of mere text-book study and have adopted means of instruction well suited to offset them. The fact remains, however, that most of our modern books of history are distressingly hard to read. Those which are designed as text-books are a little more than guides to study and a little less than connected accounts capable of being read with pleasure. Those which are intended for reference or are in other ways designed for the use of scholars are sometimes crabbed in style and confusing in arrangement. Too often one is unable conscientiously to recommend “for the gentleman’s library” works that have the merit of fullness and authority.

As for the interesting books, they have faults of their own. Copies of Green’s *History of the English People* are nearly as common as Bibles in the homes of the nation, mute testimony to public appreciation of history made readable. Yet how is one to obtain a connected idea of English history from a book in which most of the important statements of fact are made in subordinate clauses, or shadowed forth in some such formula as “The King’s resistance suddenly gave way”? Many earnest souls have wrestled with this difficulty without being able exactly to define it.

History is an art as well as a science. It is a science from the point of view of the investigator, an art as it affects the reader. There *is* such a thing as culture through reading as distinct from culture through study; there *is* such a thing as a literary method capable of producing upon the human spirit results that cannot be attained by scientific methods of instruction or by individual research and reflection. And it is not until these truths are fully realized and thoroughly applied to historical writing that history will really take in the popular consciousness the place to which it is entitled as at once the most generally important sort of information and the most delightful kind of reading.

One does not forget, of course, the work of such masters of narrative and of English style as Prescott and Motley. Of the masterpieces of these historians one can make no general criticism; one can only echo the pathetic cry with which a certain French critic sought to reprove the greatest of French novelists, "It is so long, Victor Hugo; it is so long." Few have time to read detailed histories of a relatively short epoch, and summary history need not be dry history.

The majority of us are neither romanticists nor realists. Secretly we are dissatisfied with both romance and realism. We want life, rather than realism or information; but we want ideals, large and important human motives, rather than fanciful psychology. What shall we read? History, if rightly presented, would solve our problem.

Whatever is undertaken by the capable and level-headed persons who are in charge of the Yale University Press is generally well done, and the series of fifty historical volumes unpretentiously entitled *Chronicles of America* is no exception to this rule. The books are of conveniently small size; they are ornamentally but tastefully bound; they are printed in beautiful type upon an unusually fine quality of paper; they are fully and artistically illustrated. These qualities which make the volumes agreeable to the book-lover are sufficiently rare, in combination, to deserve special remark; but it is the readability of the text—its adaptability to culture through reading—which makes the series almost a new departure.

The writers of these volumes—men of wide reputation for scholarship—have produced, not intricately detailed narrative, not dry summaries, not merely ingenious *comments* upon history, but vital narratives compelling attention alike by lively play of intellect, by nicety of judgment, and by the judicious and strictly subordinate use of material possessing color or human interest. To use such matter in a way that economizes discussion instead of prolonging it is an art which the authors appear thoroughly to have mastered. For these and other reasons, the present writer very much prefers *The Chronicles of America* to any other long American history or series of books about American history that he has examined.

One who inspects these volumes, dipping in here and there, will perhaps find that in many cases the number of details is not much greater than is found in the shorter histories. The development appears to consist largely in the work of artfully impressing upon the reader's mind the essential ideas. This is literary work, of a kind that cannot be done unless the reader's interest is really engaged. There is a kind of learning that must be *absorbed*; these volumes are full of it, and it is in a form readily assimilated. Especially is expansion directed toward the lives of significant men. Thus, the volume about the Revolutionary War is entitled *Washington and his Comrades in Arms*; that which immediately follows it is called *The Fathers of the Constitution*. As a result, the volumes, not being biography, are as interesting as biography, or, indeed, as fiction. It is not merely that the authors have achieved a successful compromise between the scientific and the biographical view of history. Rather

they appear to proceed upon an intelligible principle. The progress of the nation supplies the thread—a thread never lost sight of; but a perception of character alone gives life to historic narrative, and it is only through a concise and accurate dealing with this element that events can be invested with human interest, and can blend with it to form the whole, which is—not social science, but history. When George M. Wrong discusses the European settling of the Revolution he goes into English politics of the time with a familiarity and ease which reveals personalities and psychological factors in a manner absolutely essential to a right attitude of mind on the subject. It is not enough to know causes and effects; one must shake hands with Lord Howe—yes, and with George III!

The forty-eighth volume, that entitled *Woodrow Wilson and the World War*, by Charles Seymour, head of the history department at Yale, is among the most remarkable in the series. Here exactly the same method is carried out as in the preceding volumes, and the result makes it appear that a study of the past may enable the historian of the present to see the events of our own time in as true a perspective as can the historian of the future. One does not see how a book written fifty years hence could be franker, more unbiassed, more critical in spirit, or for most human purposes more informing, than is this work of Dr. Seymour's. Besides giving a well-proportioned account of America's connection with the war and with the peace, it is quite the best thing yet written about Woodrow Wilson.

THE RUIN OF THE ANCIENT CIVILIZATION AND THE TRIUMPH OF CHRISTIANITY. By Guglielmo Ferrero. Translated by the Hon. Lady Whitehead. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

With that sculpturesque clearness, that Italianate and classic lucidity, which is characteristic of him, the most original and philosophical of modern historians traces the history of the Roman Empire from the death of Alexander Severus in the year 235 to the final dissolution.

In the year 235 the ancient civilization, though enfeebled, was intact. What was the cause of its ultimate overthrow? "The principle of authority," writes Ferrero, "is the key to all civilization." In the earlier periods it was the Roman Senate which, though largely deprived of power, supplied this essential element. As soon as the moral power of the Senate was overridden, government had to rest upon force, and from force came anarchy. Various rulers, realizing this fundamental truth, strove to reconstitute authority by reviving Mithraism, or sun-worship, and by deifying themselves and their colleagues. They resisted Christianity because it was an individualizing and disintegrating force. But no real restoration of authority was achieved in Europe until, with the coöperation of Christianity, a new principle of authority, the divine right of Kings, was set up. Now, this also has been undermined, and we have even passed beyond the deification of the people, no longer believing in the dictum, *Vox populi, vox dei*.